

February 12, 2006

Script for *Fabulous Furry Tales* podcast #6

Welcome to *Altivo's Fabulous Furry Tales*, a discussion of furry literature and related arts, presented every few weeks. I'm your host, Altivo, the Clydesdale librarian, back again to discuss animal characters and anthropomorphics in literary works.

This presentation's musical introduction is Sara MacKimmie's performance of George Gershwin's classic song, "Nice Work if You Can Get It," which I think fits in nicely with the story of economic struggle in our featured book. You can find Sara MacKimmie's musical talents on the web, at dmusic.com.

Back in the third of these podcasts, I discussed *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame, which I feel is a seminal work in the evolution of modern anthropomorphic literature. Grahame never wrote any sequels to his novel, but several other authors have done so. At this time I want to look at one of those, written by British author Jan Needle and published in 1981. The title is:

Wild Wood

Jan Needle began his writing career in journalism, writing for Glasgow's *Daily Herald*, but after a short time moved on into drama and playwriting. He has written and produced stage and screen plays for adults and children, as well as writing both adult novels and children's stories. As far as I am aware, though, *Wild Wood* is his only serious foray into the world of the anthropomorphic to date. Rather than a true sequel, which would relate the events befalling Grahame's characters after the end of the original book, Needle has given us a parallel account of the same events that Grahame related. The story is told in first person by one Baxter Ferret, a member of the proletariat as we might say, and a representative of a rather different socio-economic setting than that of Toad, or Rat, or even Badger, though Badger had a foot in each world so to speak and was well-known to Baxter's friends and associates. The Baxter who tells his tale is much older and wiser than the young ferret who appears in it, of course. His account begins with the two hard winters of 1906 and 1907, and runs thus:

"I was very young at the time, but I was big for my age and as bright as button. My old man had passed on some years before, so I'd had to work from pretty early on to help eke out the money. The farmer who'd gave me a start was a modern-minded chap for them days, and went in for machinery, which he let me tinker with, as much as I liked. It didn't do much good in terms of advancement, but it gave me something not many other animals had. I had knowledge. I could take down and rebuild engines and machinery. I could do steam, farm gear, and the even more new-fangled stuff; the type of vehicle that my old mother called 'infernal combustion'. What's more, I could drive."

This paragraph, which comes shortly after the introduction of the tale, gives a good foreshadowing of the way in which Baxter's story will dovetail with that of Toad as originally related by Grahame. "Dovetail" is a particularly good way to describe the intricate and well-crafted means by which this author conjoins his novel with Grahame's original written 75 years earlier. For instance, Baxter's first encounter with the notorious Mr. Toad, takes place on a dark and snowy road while he is driving his employer's Throgmorton Squeezer, an early farm truck that he has taken on an errand:

"After what felt like an age I reached the edge of the Wood. As the trees ended the sky became a little brighter, the snow swirled less wild, life rapidly got more worth living. I looked carefully both ways, although in those days, in those parts, traffic was almost non-existent. Only a madman, in any case, would be out and about on a night like this. All clear. I eased out the clutch and drove slowly off the narrow track onto the safety and comfort of the hard, metalled road.

"I didn't hear a thing at first. There was a sudden, heart-wrenching glare of lights around the bend, a wild impression of something tearing towards me through the snow, then finally—noise. A screaming engine, squealing brakes, a raucous, lunatic poop-pooing of a horn. The car hit the lorry at the front, tore off the starting handle, the radiator and one mudguard, bounced across the road like a rubber ball, glanced off a tree, skeetered back to the centre again—and disappeared into the night.

"I had met my madman.

"As the noise of the Armstrong Hardcastle Mouton Special faded away I sat in the cab of the assassinated Squeezer and cried. The noise of my sobs, the steam escaping from the shattered radiator, the hot engine cooling down: these sounds were swallowed up in the pale, muffling blanket of the snow."

As you can see, Needle has a powerful ability to tell a first person story, with color and energy that evokes the sympathy and participation of the reader. Baxter loses his employment, of course, even though the accident was not his fault. The reason he was in the fateful place at the wrong time and encountered Toad's maniacal driving was that he had detoured from his employer's mission to visit with his associates that afternoon, where serious discussion of social class distinctions, economic discrimination, and the injustices overlooked by the privileged class had been held at length.

That, of course, is the real meat of Needle's version. In *Wild Wood* we learn how a new visitor to the Wood, one Boddington Stoa, succeeded in stirring up sufficient anger against the more bourgeois residents of the River Bank that the eventual invasion and takeover of Toad Hall was made possible. Injustices both small and large are related, with neither anger nor pathos, but in a journalistic manner that leaves it up to us as readers to recognize them and sympathize with the victims, most of whom belong to the poor and working classes. Toad's other victims, including the gaoler's daughter and the barge woman, are not omitted, but naturally much of the story relates to the residents of the Wild Wood itself.

Of course, even Grahame pointed out and criticized the lazy and wasteful manner of Toad's lifestyle, the way in which he squandered his inherited money and never did anything useful. But did you consider that Rat also had no visible means of support? He whiled away his time writing poetry and boating on the river, but from whence came his money to buy goods and maintain his home? Badger, of course, had an inheritance and speaks of it as not really his own work, and he did appear to be somewhat generous with his neighbors, though when we hear the two young hedgehogs' account of that snowy morning when they lost their way and were given breakfast by the Badger, we may well see things in a new light. Their story is retold here by Baxter's friend O. B. Weasel, who may be embellishing a bit for his own purposes:

"Well, you know what kids are—more feeling than sense. You wouldn't have caught me at the same lark, but they just rang the bell and asked for breakfast."

"This caused a laugh. Us older animals would have rather starved than been so bold with Mr Badger's doorbell."

"You never can tell, as they say," went on O.B. "He pulled them in, kind as you like, and give them a plate of porridge apiece. I told them they were lucky to get out alive and they just blinked. Thought I was barmy. Children, eh?!" He shook his head, and we all laughed again. O.B. then grew stern.

"Now listen my friends. They'd hardly got their snouts nicely buried in it—and they told me particular that nice old Mr Badger let them have condensed milk, unlike nasty old ma, who makes them take salt merely—when out of a door, bright as a pair of buttons, pop Rat and Mole. Of course, porridge is not good enough for them, condensed milk or no condensed milk. It's a pile of rashers as thick as your leg, and eggs galore, and oodles and oodles of hot, buttery toast. Oodles of it."

"A general sigh went up at this, and many an eye became dim and dreamy. There wasn't an animal in the room that couldn't see it, as vivid as could be. Although how many had ever had such breakfast, I couldn't hazard a guess."

The story goes on to tell how the young hedgehogs were forced to cook breakfast for the Otter when he arrived, and how exaggerated the story of Mole's "hunting" by the residents of Wild Wood had become. Otter got rid of the hedgehog boys by telling Badger that they had just eaten the huge pile of ham that he had consumed himself, and they were tossed out into the snow to find their way home while the Otter, Mole, and Rat prepared to eat lunch, having only just consumed a huge breakfast.

Baxter himself struggles against the inflammatory speeches of O. B. Weasel and Boddington, not only because he himself is now in the employ of the Toad as a mechanic (and goodness knows, Toad must have needed one) but because he is resistant to the attentions that Boddington is paying to Baxter's own sister, Dolly. Nonetheless, he too is converted to the revolutionary frame of mind on the day when he is dismissed from his employment, not by Toad himself, but by the imperious Badger on the morning when he was sent to bring back a new motor car just purchased by the Toad:

"I had purposely left myself just exactly the amount of time I needed to arrive at Toad Hall on the stroke of ten-thirty. Once bitten twice shy, they do say: I was not allowing myself even a hint of temptation to go for a spin on my own account. The memory of my interview with the farm gaffer was still much too fresh in my mind. Accordingly I swung between the imposing gate-posts and cruised slowly up the gravel driveway with seconds to spare. Almost at the steps I passed three animals who were approaching the house. From their backs I knew them immediately: The grey old Badger, the lean and eager Rat, and their stoop-shouldered friend the Mole. This was a turn-up for the books.

"As the sound of the motor faded away the front door opened and Toad appeared. His face, what you could see of it, lit up as he spotted first the motor car, then his friends. Not that you could see much, for that silly animal, the terror of the highways, was wearing his usual rig-out—big cap, goggles, leather driving coat, let the sunshine go hang. He bounced down the steps, shouting some excited greeting to them.

"It was very odd. You could feel the tension in the air. It was like an approaching lightning storm. The three animals beside the car said nothing, just stared at him, their faces grim. I'm rather confused in my memory, like, as to exactly what happened next, but certainly they grabbed him, squawking like a chicken he was, and half dragged, half pushed him back into the house. Badger turned at the top of the steps and spoke to me. He told me the car wouldn't be needed, and nor would I, neither. Not today, not tomorrow, not no more. Mr Toad had changed his mind. Changed his mind! Had it changed for him, more like! The row in the hallway was something shocking. I tried to speak to the badger, tried to argue, like. But it was no good. He turned on his heel and disappeared, slamming the door behind him.

"So there I sat—jobless once more—in a brand new red motor car that wasn't mine. It flashed through my mind to drive it off, I must admit, in lieu of wages. But as I was only owed for a week, which wouldn't have bought a spoke in the Hardcastle's wheel, the idea didn't last long! I'm not sure how many minutes I sat there, getting miserabler and miserabler, but the door never opened again, nor nobody reappeared. At last I got out, flung my livery coat on the front seat, and started the slow drag home."

As you can see, the author has a great flair for describing the feelings of the working man who has been unjustly tossed from his much needed position at the whim of some heedless and wealthier individual. By his own account, Jan Needle grew up the son of a deck worker, and nephew of both a respected war veteran and a notorious conscientious objector. He must have been exposed to a great many heated discussions when he was young. Interestingly, his veteran Uncle Ron insisted that the objecting Uncle Les was the braver man of the two, while Needle's father took the patriotic side and disparaged his "dirty conchie" of a brother. In any case, the author's descriptions of political speechmaking and rabble-rousing underlaid by sincere emotion can be very powerful at times. We learn much more than Grahame told us about the environs and folk of River Bank and Wild Wood, and gain a new and broader perspective on the nature of Grahame's protagonists by the time the story is ended. We also find out that it does not end happily for everyone, as in truth we might expect if we thought about it for long after reading only Grahame's account of the events.

Wild Wood has been released by more than one publisher, but unfortunately never by a North American house. Consequently, it can be difficult to obtain in the US,

though a little persistent searching on the web can net you a copy. I paid well under twenty dollars, including shipping, for a paperback, and should put in a little plug here for abebooks.com, my favorite internet source for difficult out of print books. If you are lucky, you may be able to get a copy through your local library by interlibrary loan. There are a few out there in the US library system. Listeners abroad will have better luck, at least in Commonwealth nations. I found copies readily available for purchase or lending in most of the larger English-speaking countries, particularly the UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. I hope the longer quotes I've used this time encourage you to make the effort to find and read this book, as it is well worth the trouble.

Here is Baxter Ferret's own final comment:

"Looking back on those days, I'm still a bit mystified by it all. Things got better after the Toad Hall episode true, but I'm jiggered if I understands the ins and outs of it. Some of the Wild Wooders got even more humble and kowtowish after Toad and Co recaptured the big house, while others, like the Chief Weasel say, become almost as posh as they were. One thing I am sure of though. Speaking purely personal, like, and I reckon I ought to be a bit ashamed of it, maybe, I never got settled to the life like I'd used to be. There was peace all right, but there was something else too. Regret's the nearest to it I can think of, but I'm probably wrong. I never did understand it all, really. Not so's you'd notice."

That brings me to the conclusion of this week's discussion. Thanks for listening, and let me once more ask you to contribute your thoughts and suggestions. You can send your e-mail to altivo@livejournal.com. Until next time then, good reading to all.

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